

Malaysian Politics in the Age of Media-tion

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Abstract — Most people are not active participants in politics, thus they experience media-ized politics which has resulted in an industry of public relations consultants who have integrated into the political structure. A total of 19 Malaysian politicians, media consultants and socio-political were interviewed for this study. The findings showed that there is some evidence of media-ization and PR-ization in Malaysian political parties, with the use of centralised management structures, external marketing and media professionals. Malaysia is also transiting between pre-modern and modern to post-modern campaigns.

Media-ization and PR-ization of Politics, New Media, Political Communication

I. MEDIA-IZATION OF POLITICS

According to Nimmo and Coombs (1990) [1], politics is a second-hand reality for most people because they are not active participants. The passive mass audience experiences mediated politics, a set of manipulated and distorted media images.

Contemporary politics in democracies is about creating a public: Individuals amassed by professional public builders using mass media as a social glue to construct and hold them together (Louw, 2010) [2]. Although these individuals do not interact or communicate with each other, they are assembled and guided by mass media to behave similarly.

Public opinion-driven politics is the centre of media-ized politics, where media and manipulation has become the heart of governance. Entman (1989) [3] argued that ready-made schematas or frameworks could influence people to think in a certain manner, as well as guide and turn isolated individuals into publics that behave collectively.

Media-ized politics resulted in an industry of professional media consultants that integrated into the political structure (Louw, 2010) [1]. Public relations practitioners seek the most cost-effective way to deliver success to their political masters.

II. THE PROFESSIONALISATION AND RATIONALISATION OF POLITICS

In democracies, political parties and elections are key components linking citizens to state. Traditionally, parties and voters were linked based on socio-economic and ideological ties but there has since been three specific changes.

The first was electoral demographics (Dalton & Wattenberg, 2002 [4]; Gunther, Mantero & Linz, 2002 [5]; Inglehart, 1990 [6]) as socio-economic shifts, increased mobility and changes in religion and ethnicity eroded traditional ideological and regional ties between parties and voters. Second was the advent of mass media, especially broadcast, which were more cost-efficient than on-the-ground campaigns. As the mass media gained importance in elections political parties evolved into a mass "catch-all" (Kirchheimer, 1966) [7] with weaker ideologies and broader policies appealing to wider citizen bases.

Thirdly, as political parties became professionalised, they developed centralised campaign structures and used external professional experts (Blumler & Gurevitch, 1995 [8]; Farrell Kolodny & Medvic, 2001 [9]; Lilleker & Lees-Marshment, 2005 [10]; Swanson & Mancini, 1996 [11]). Modern parties relied less on traditional organisations and ideologies and more on centralised management structures, external marketing and media professionals, becoming "electoral-professional" or "modern cadre" parties (Davis, 2010) [12].

A. Political Public Relations

Political public relations involves multi-pronged strategies that put a positive spin on the politician-employer and negative spin on the adversary (Louw, 2010) [2]. Awareness of journalistic practices is essential because public relations is about getting journalists to run stories with minimal change (Louw, 2010) [2], knowing what is newsworthy and understanding their institutional and time constraints. Public relations practitioners become a dependable source of free information via their media briefings and reliable background research, and can easily place stories to control the agenda.

Although public relations professionals prefer "free" publicity when journalists use their material in news stories, they sometimes pay for niche media such as direct mail, telemarketing and the Internet, to ensure access to a specific target audience, a method known as "narrowcasting." Political spin doctors utilise marketing and advertising (Maarek, 1995 [13]; Newman, 1994 [14]), with politicians being "positioned" or "sold" like "branded" products to match a particular voter profile in appropriate constituencies, based audience and public opinion research. Branding creates a distinct image to the politician and party's general stance or values.

Politics is not just about words; image and appearances do matter. Scammell (1999) [15] noted that parties and politicians "must attend to political image if they want to be serious players in the political market." Being a politician today means having to adopt a particular "face" and projecting an appropriate "mask" to attract supporters. Previously, party leaders decided on the profile and "face" but now such decisions are made by communication professionals such as image consultants, spin-doctors, pollsters and advisors.

Politicians and parties attempt to be more appealing by linking with icons and symbols of popular culture such as actors, musicians and sports stars. Political spin advisers believe that attractive and appropriate media images with celebrities create an aura of popularity with borrowed trust and admiration from pop icons and encourage voters to see their leaders differently. Skilful spin doctors and political public relations managers are expert demagogues who can create the "celebrity politician" (Louw, 2010) [2].

Political communication involves scripting and disseminating principles, ideas, sentiments and beliefs. To develop and maintain party followers as well as politically navigate and orientate the masses, political public relations practitioners construct mythologies and political identities (Louw, 2010) [2] as well as media messages that are internalised by followers and masses as part of their political beliefs and identities. The construction and dissemination of beliefs, myths, and political identities is the heart of "political socialisation" (Almond, 1965) [16]. There is little need to create deep belief systems as the masses only vote every few years. Shallow beliefs are more useful for political managers to steer voters by attracting them during elections and distracting them later to avoid interference with policy work.

In summary, political public relations practitioners use their expertise to ensure that the media and public perspectives are very similar to their political masters. Spin doctors distract the masses and divert their attention away from issues that politicians do not want them to think about, so that they would not create problems for policymakers by demanding real participation in policy-making (Louw, 2010) [2]. Ultimately, public relations professionals maximise support for their political master(s) through winning the support of interest groups and/or reducing support for opponents.

B. Public Relations and Change in the Political Process

Prior to reliance on public relations professionals, party chiefs could organise functioning election machinery by persuading grassroots supporters to work. Non-party public relations professionals changed the whole process by analysing and steering public opinion with their media and research skills. They selected political leaders based on television performance, not party loyalty, resulting in a "cartel party" (Negrine, 2008) [17]. Public relations spin doctors focused on winning elections through political marketing by de-ideologising and de-politicising the party's image and messages to appeal to swing voters. Therefore, it is evident that firstly, power has shifted away from party leaders towards consultants and spin doctors (Newman, 1994) [14].

Secondly, political leaders needed to be visually appealing, able to speak in soundbites and follow scripts designed by spin doctors. Skilled politicians could bypass party hierarchies and appeal directly to voters, altering party-power relationships to those who understood PR-ization (public relations-ization) and tele-visualisation (Louw, 2010) [2]. Spin doctors successfully manipulated media outlets by providing photos or soundbites.

Thirdly, PR-ization made politics expensive due to media production costs and the hiring of public relations professionals: Specialists with technical skills acquired outside politics but now work in a politics (Negrine, 2008) [17]. Their expertise was important, not party commitment or loyalty; they worked for the highest bidder. Johnson (2000) [18] said there are three categories of professionals: Strategists, specialists and vendors. Strategists are top-tier "key consultants who develop the campaign messages and communicate it to voters, and provide strategic advice and support throughout the campaign." Second-tier specialists provide "essential campaign services" such as fund-raising and speech writing; while third-tier vendors supply products and services.

Fourthly, public relations professionals systematically mobilised popular culture to reach voters (Street, 1997) [19], requiring politicians to adopt a populist image. Packaging is the idea that public representations of politics are managed and controlled by spin doctors rather than parties and politicians (Street, 2001) [19]. Thus, political discourse becomes simplified, with power balance and responsibility shifting from politicians to media consultants. Franklin (1994) [20] suggested that the marketed image of politicians and policies was inaccurate, superficial and artificial because politicians have lost their capacity to reflect on politics, becoming people who thought in "sound bites" (Franklin, 1994) [20].

Fifthly, television deflects voter attention away from policy problems by showing simplified and idealised presentations to stir emotions such as mobilising support for a person or position, demonising people, creating "pariah" groups, and building selective outrage, indignation and hostility (Louw, 2010) [2]. Due to the 24/7 online environment, PR-ized politics involves running a permanent campaign (Selnow, 1994) [21]. Politicians need public relations teams to control their projected image by churning stories for journalists looking to fill news holes and minimise the risk of bad publicity.

Sixthly, PR-ization and tele-visualised politics undermine face-to-face interaction in local political meetings. Oratorical public speeches, question-and-answer discussions and debates are different from television soundbites and slick images. Television lures politicians away from debate, discussion and selling policies to reciting or performing scripted lines.

Seventhly, press power within politics has declined because PR-ized politics reaches voters through marketing techniques such as direct mail or the Internet and bypassing journalists.

Lastly, PR-ization produces "politics of avoidance" (Selnow, 1994) [21], where contentious issues are usually avoided due to reliance on opinion polls. Politics becomes polls-driven with public opinion being monitored constantly, resulting in the "bland-ization" of politics i.e. comfortable, non-controversial, centrist politics that lack real debate and

focus on entertaining and distracting the masses. Spin teams run focus groups and hold opinion polls to ascertain what is "damaging" and "helpful" to their politician-employer's image.

C. The Media-ization of Election Campaigns

Norris (2000, 2004) [22, 23] said that campaigns over the past 100 years could be divided into three stages, based on communication channels and techniques. From the 19th century until World War II, the main method was direct communication like face-to-face meetings and public events (Maarek, 1995 [24]; Norris, 2000 [22]). Pre-modern election campaigns had three features: A partisan press, reliance on local volunteers, and a short national campaign (Norris, Curtice, Sanders, Scammell, & Semetko, 1999) [25].

In the 1930s, political parties aired propaganda films in cinemas (Hollins, 1981) [26] but this annoyed the working-class audience, which led them to disseminate their films. By the end of 1950s, political parties lost control of the mass communication of political programmes as broadcasters determined the agenda and speakers. From the late 1950s to early 1960s, political communication was essentially mediated (Swanson & Mancini, 1996) [27]. The second era modernised and became television-dominated (Denver & Hands, 1992 [28]; Harrop, 1986 [29]; Kavanagh, 1995 [30]).

The early 1990s marked the third era of post-modernism in the digital age (Norris, 2000 [22]; Wring, 1996 [31]) and was driven by three factors. Firstly, television became more fragmented (Norris et al., 1999 [25]) and media proliferation led to an "electronic glut" (Seymour-Ure, 1996) [32]. Secondly, newspapers were less partisan to maintain market share (Norris et al., 1999) [25], so political parties could not rely on them to communicate messages. Thirdly, the advent of information and communication technologies (ICTs) enabled politicians to directly connect with voters. In this post-modern era, politicians use new media to obtain direct and indirect communication by building a hyper-media campaign (Howard, 2006) [33]. Table 1 shows how political parties adapted to the new environment by changing campaign communications.

TABLE 1. THE EVOLUTION OF POLITICAL PARTIES AND THEIR ROLE IN CAMPAIGN COMMUNICATION CHANGES

	<i>Pre-modern</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Post-modern</i>
Predominant era	Mid-19th century to 1950s	Early 1960s-1980s	1990s+
Nature of political parties	Mass membership	Catch-all party	Cartel party
Campaign organisation	Local and decentralised party volunteers	Nationally coordinated with greater professionalisation	Nationally coordinated but decentralised operations
Media	Partisan press, local posters and pamphlets, radio broadcasts	Television broadcasts through main evening news, targeted direct mail	Television narrowcasting, direct and mediated websites, e-mail, online discussion groups.

	<i>Pre-modern</i>	<i>Modern</i>	<i>Post-modern</i>
			intranets

a. Adapted from Katz and Mair (2002) [34], Norris (2002) [23]

New media enable political parties and politicians to communicate directly with voters (Morris, 1999) [36] and interactivity replicates peer-to-peer conversation (Thomas, 2005) [37]. In the post-modern era of political communication voters are targeted using every media (Norris, 2001) [38].

III. THE INTERNET'S TRANSFORMING EFFECT

The Internet is a decentralised, global communication network mediated by computers and telecommunication. Lievreuw and Livingstone (2002) [39] outline its key features. Firstly, new media shape and are shaped by society in a "recombinant" manner, meaning that new media systems are hybrids of existing technologies and innovations in interconnected technical and institutional networks.

Secondly, network refers to "a broad, multiplex connection in which many points or "nodes" (persons, groups, machines, collections of information, organisations) are embedded." Society is increasingly structured by networks (Castells, 2002) [40] and new media challenges the dominant "one-to-many" frame of mass communication by adding the "one-to-one" and "many-to-many." Thirdly, new media are ubiquitous as everyone depends on Information Communication Technology (ICT) systems to monitor and transmit information.

Lastly, Internet interactivity enables users to "generate, seek and share content selectively, and to interact with other individuals or groups, on a scale that is impractical with traditional mass media" (Lievreuw & Livingstone, 2002) [39]. Although selectivity, interaction and content creation exist in other media, the specific recombination on a vast scale has resulted in new and challenging social effects.

The information technology revolution has not just altered the media scene but also the communication concept (Iyengar & McGrady, 2007) [41]. Traditional communication forms were point-to-point (one-to-one) or broadcast (one-to-many), and limited to print, audio, or video. Most users could not reach a significant audience. With the Internet, there is simultaneous point-to-point and broadcast forms of communication and individual users have easy access to an unlimited audience.

In the new media environment, the distinction between media producers and consumers (prosumers) and the elite and masses has blurred (Press & Williams, 2010) [42]. Public figures such as politicians find it hard to maintain a carefully crafted public persona as online users with smartphones can capture embarrassing images and circulate claims of scandalous behaviour. Bloggers, being part of the Fifth Estate (Tapsell, 2013) [43] have become key political players, often challenging journalists and political elites.

Social media, alternative websites and online chatrooms provide new areas for public discussion of socio-political issues, bypassing traditional media gatekeeping. Political and social activists use the Web to mount virtual and real-world opposition to political, economic and social elites by providing

communication channels for citizens to directly access news on politics, economics and society (Press & Williams, 2010) [42].

Today, the Internet provides a direct communication channel that must be integrated into an election campaign to balance and enhance offline activities (Panagopoulos, 2009) [44]. O'Reilly (2005) [45] said that Web 1.0's static one-way dialogue, content-driven websites has evolved into Web 2.0's interactivity and social networking. Online campaigns have become more sophisticated and an integral communication component to the overall campaign strategy (O'Reilly, 2005) [45]. Web 2.0 allows candidates or parties to be more market-oriented and publicly responsive, in this way meeting the openness criteria and public demand for a responsive and in-touch government (Stoker, 2006) [46]. Politicians and parties can use public input to refine their policies or communication.

IV. MALAYSIA'S POLITICAL AND MEDIA SYSTEM

Malaysia, a former British colony, became independent in 1957. It is a federation of states with central and state governments overseeing different jurisdictions. Since independence, *Barisan Nasional* (BN, previously the Alliance), a coalition of ethnic-based political parties have ruled Malaysia for more than 50 years, making it the longest-serving elected government in the world that is still in office (Loh, 2009) [47].

Although Malaysia has had a tradition of holding regular general elections, it has long been considered as a "pseudo-democracy" or "flawed democracy." While the government has to compete in elections and respond to citizens' demands, the political framework virtually ensures electoral victory for BN (Tan & Ibrahim, 2008) [48]. BN's ethnic component parties such as the United Malays National Organisation (UMNO), Malaysian Chinese Association (MCA) and Malaysian Indian Congress (MIC) have garnered majority of votes from the Malay and non-Malay electorate.

Opposition parties such as the Democratic Action Party (DAP), *Parti Keadilan Rakyat* (PKR, People's Justice Party) and Pan-Malaysian Islamic Party (PAS) often complain about the uneven level playing field due to gerrymandering and mal-apportionment. The legal framework also favours BN as laws are used to contain opposing views and discourage alternative discourse that does not fit the official paradigm. The other level of control is through media ownership, especially traditional media, which is directly and indirectly controlled by the government or government-linked individuals or corporations.

Unsurprisingly, new media have become increasingly popular due to public perception that they have higher credibility than traditional media (Mustafa, 2014) [49]. The Internet provides a platform for Malaysians to freely express their opinions, give feedback and criticisms via comments and postings, which traditional media have failed to do (Surin, 2010) [50]. Governments in developing democracies, however, perceive the Internet as a double edged sword. While it brings economic benefits, it also allows "undesirable" ideologies to permeate into the public sphere and challenge the political hegemony, thus justifying the need for wider state censorship, firewalls and data filters (Loo, 2007) [51].

Political communication in Malaysia tends to be vertical as politicians act as the elite rather than public servants, which accounts for the lack of interactivity on government websites as e-mail enquiries are left unanswered. New media becomes a public relations channel rather than a public sphere for citizens to connect with their elected representatives (Loo, 2007) [51]. In fact, the Malaysian government has been using the Internet as a marketing and public relations tool to spread bureaucratic information and state propaganda.

Weiss (2012) [52] said that Malaysian political blogs combined current and campaign events, commentary, feedback and reader interaction. Gong (2009) [53] found that Malaysian political blogs were designed for readers to personally connect with the blogger. Such blogs had three overlapping functions: First, they set the agenda by sending messages to mobile phones and other devices, with information filtering down to traditional media; second, their interactive social setting created a sense of community among visitors; and third, as a mobilisation tool for campaign events (Gong, 2009) [53].

V. POLITICAL CAMPAIGNS DURING MALAYSIA'S GENERAL ELECTIONS

Political campaigns during general elections started in 1959. At that time, the mass media was not fully developed and the focus was on teaching citizens about elections and political participation (Tamam & Govindasamy, 2009) [54]. The emergence of radio and television enabled the ruling alliance to reach more voters; opposition coverage was suppressed.

However, the May 1969 racial riots changed Malaysia's political landscape. The government declared a state of emergency, suspended Parliament and formed the National Operations Council to run the country. Publications of political parties were banned and strict censorship imposed (Karthigesu, 1994 [55]; Mohd Safar, 1996 [56]; Mulyadi, 2004 [57]; Vasil, 1980 [58]). Television and radio stations had limited broadcast time; only official announcements were allowed.

Parliament was restored in 1971 but this incident affected subsequent elections (Rachagan, 1987) [59]. Public political rallies were banned during the 1974 General Election and campaigns were limited to door-to-door and small indoor groups. Television and radio became a means to disseminate political information (Ismail, 1978) [60]. During the 1978 General Election, political campaign methods included newspapers, television, radio, leaflets, billboards and posters, small group discussions and door-to-door (Ong, 1980) [61].

In the 1980s, political communication became more dependent on mass media such as newspaper and television. However, media coverage was partisan towards BN; due to its close ties with media owners. The opposition was forced to rely on small scale door-to-door campaigns, party-owned media, posters, handbills and billboards.

However, the 1999 General Election was a watershed mark in Malaysian politics with the sacking of former Deputy Prime Minister Anwar Ibrahim. Traditional media experienced a credibility gap from backing the government and slanting their coverage against Anwar. This also marked the start of Internet use in political communication. Opposition parties, for the first

time, found a way to reach potential voters. The Web was the third most important source of political information, outranked only by political talks, gatherings and television (Baharuddin, Abdullah@Kassim, Rahmat, & Abdul Rasid, 2000) [62].

The advent of mobile phones and short-messaging services (SMS) marked a change in electoral political communication. Scholars noted a significant increase in SMS use during the 2004 General Election (Hassan, 2004) [63]. BN and the opposition used SMS to inform voters about election-related issues, publicise political slogans and instruct campaign workers (Emmanuel, Loh, & Karim, 2004) [64]. There was a rise in e-mail and Internet use in campaigns to disseminate political news and obtain voter feedback.

The trend towards using new media continued in the 2008 General Election, which was blamed for BN's unprecedented loss of their two-thirds majority in Federal Parliament and control of five states. A fortnight after the election results, ex-premier Abdullah Ahmad Badawi admitted that BN's performance was affected by new media. He said, "We certainly lost the Internet war, the cyber-war ... It was a serious misjudgement ... We thought that the newspapers and TV were supposed to be important, but young people were looking at SMSes and blogs" (Kee, 2008) [65].

BN leaders then started establishing their online presence using websites, blogs or SNS such as Twitter and Facebook to court young voters; they also developed online e-government portals for citizen action, input and service delivery (Mohsin & Raha, 2006-7) [66]. In 2010, the UMNO Youth chief, Khairy Jamaluddin, hosted a "tweetup" with his followers. State officials and their allies worked to improve traditional media by giving greater coverage to the opposition to discourage readers from looking elsewhere for news (Weiss, 2012) [52].

The latest General Election in 2013 saw innovative uses of new media in campaigns. Many YouTube videos emerged, in addition to Internet radio and online live transmission of political rallies, in addition to Facebook and Twitter updates as well as mobile phone applications. Unlike in 2008 when cyberspace was mainly pro-opposition, the 2013 General Election saw the rise of pro-BN bloggers and web news portals (Tapsell, 2013) [43]. PM Najib had his own official website www.1Malaysia.com.my; many MPs maintained and used their blogs in their campaign.

VI. PURPOSE OF STUDY

The purpose of this study is to explore the level of media-ization and PR-ization of politics in Malaysia. It aims to examine the impact and importance of media and PR strategies in the political process in Malaysia, especially with ICT use.

VII. METHODOLOGY

In-depth interviews are useful qualitative techniques to answer the "why" and "how" questions and probe communication attitudes and behaviours (Rubin, Rubin, Haridakis, & Piele, 2010) [67]. In this study, the researcher conducted in-depth interviews from January to March 2013 with 19 key politicians, media consultants and socio-political bloggers who use new media as part of their political

communication strategy and could provide actual account from the ground and personal experience. The respondents were identified based on observations of their media use and reputation as Internet-savvy communicators.

The interviews were recorded, transcribed and analysed. The researcher identified key elements and recurring themes, the data and categorised them. Using grounded theory analysis (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) [68], also known as the constant comparative method, the categories were compared and categorised until saturation point was reached.

VIII. FINDINGS AND ANALYSIS

A. Media-ization and PR-ization of Politics

This study found that media-ization of politics in Malaysia is an urban phenomenon. Due to time constraints, a large segment of middle class, urban Malaysians have little time to meet their politicians face-to-face and prefer to use new media for updates on the latest news and information. One politician said that he uses print and electronic media such as Twitter, Facebook and blog, to ensure his presence "in their house." In comparison, the "personal touch is ... absolutely crucial" in rural areas and small towns and urban cities, noted one blogger. In fact, another blogger observed that media coverage on certain electoral issue affected the urban vote, not the rural. Thus, in Malaysia, politics is less media-ized in less urban areas because people have other means of communication such as personal ground contact with their political representatives.

The study also found some evidence of PR-ization especially when politicians tried to adopt a populist image. For example, Malaysian Prime Minister Najib Mohamed appeared at a concert with Korean pop star PSY and co-hosted a mega dinner with Malaysian Hollywood actress Michelle Yeoh. Pop stars, singers and celebrities also campaigned in the 2013 General Election. Another indicator of PR-ization was the practice of politics of avoidance by political parties, where contentious issues such as the implementation of the Islamic *hudud* laws or Goods and Services Tax (GST) were downplayed. Simplified presentations that touched on racial and religious issues were used during election rallies to stir emotions and win votes from certain groups.

Opinion polls, another indicator of political media-ization showed that people were unhappy with the incumbent BN government, which led to PM Najib relying heavily on his personal popularity and appealing directly to voters during the 2013 General Election. This differed from past campaigns that focused on the party's achievements and plans for the people.

However, the findings showed that Malaysian politics is not as PR-ized as the US as political leaders and strategists are still in charge of strategic communication, not PR specialists. Only BN had sufficient funds to employ an external agency as its political communication consultant while other political parties relied on their own media teams to give feedback on execution, for example, tone and language, design layout and pictures, after brainstorming with political leaders. Most Malaysian politicians drive the process and public relations merely supports and assists them.

TABLE II. PROFESSIONALISATION OF POLITICS IN MALAYSIA

Constituencies		
<i>Rural</i>	<i>Semi-Rural/Urban</i>	<i>Urban</i>
Pre-modern campaign	Modern mediated campaign	Post-modern, hypermedia campaign
Ideological ties between voters and political parties	More reliance on media, usually traditional	Focus on using the Internet as a campaign tool to reach voters
Less reliance on media	Centralised campaign structure	Increasingly volatile electorate – undecided floating voters
	Employment of professional experts outside party structure	

Different media strategies are needed for rural and urban settings as voters have various concerns, needs and media dependencies. On-the-ground interpersonal communication is important to introduce new “parachuted” candidates to locals in contested areas. Competition from hundreds of contesting candidates during general elections means that it is hard to obtain media coverage. Not everyone is online, which is why politicians and parties still need to work the ground.

New media are extremely useful for politicians and parties to propagate their manifesto nationwide, but it is argued that Internet popularity does not guarantee votes as online supporters may not be constituents or voters. However, Netizens are important political stakeholders who can sway public opinion; ignoring them would be detrimental to political survival, as BN discovered in the 2008 General Election. Political communication is a multi-pronged approach, using online and offline media strategies to fit the situation and achieve the desired end result.

C. Media Image

This study found that Malaysian politicians do not believe that personal media image is an essential part of political communication, preferring to subsume it under their party's image, especially if they are not well-known. Two politicians would rather discuss issues than project their media image.

Individual politicians did not display any branding of their personal image other than wanting to appear sincere, honest, genuine, hard-working, approachable and accessible. One politician was eager to show that he is just like any ordinary person, despite being an elected representative. He said, “We don't have a special lifestyle ... we go and eat at the same place you do ... we walk the same streets you do ... so we are the same, we are equal ...” Another consultant felt that most Malaysian politicians want to project a good, positive image such as being non-racial, colour-blind, transparent, fair and honest, even if they did not embody those qualities.

However, most individual politicians did not indicate any strategic communication of their personal image other than putting up posters during elections and participating in

PR-ized politics involves running a permanent campaign, which is expensive due to advertising costs and consultancy fees. While politicians and parties are aware that campaigning really starts as soon as the election results are announced, they may not have sufficient financial resources to sustain a permanent campaign. Consequently, Malaysian politics is not entirely PR-ized as political leaders drive the process in Malaysia, not PR strategists.

B. Professionalisation of Politics and Campaigns

Rapid urbanisation and industrialisation in Malaysia have loosened traditional ideological ties between voters and political parties that used to draw their strength from those living in traditionally designated areas such as the Malay *kampung* (village), Chinese new villages and Indian rubber estates, resulting in greater reliance on media for political news. This study found that media are more influential on floaters or middle-ground voters, mostly in urban areas, who have not taken any political position. To be persuasive, politicians and parties need to engage them although this is no easy task due to the large urban population. The researcher argues that the Internet is a very effective tool for politicians and parties as it can disseminate news to urbanites via websites, blogs and online news media or be utilised as an interpersonal communication device to directly engage voters.

Malaysian political parties have also evolved and adapted to changing circumstances. While there is still reliance on ideology and traditional grassroots networks for campaigns in rural areas, Malaysian political parties have become more “electoral-professional” with a centralised structured management and the engagement of external marketing and media consultants that manage their new media communications and online strategies. Although these experts help develop campaign messages, give feedback and provide strategic support, the process is still driven by politicians and party leaders, especially the Election Preparation Bureau, consisting of senior politicians who craft campaign strategies.

The study indicates that the use of second-tier specialists is prevalent in Malaysia. UMNO's new media unit employed more than 40 bloggers and cyber-troopers while opposition parties relied on a small media team of volunteers and supporters due to limited resources. It was common for third-tier external vendors to supply goods and services such as posters, banners and leaflets. However, top-tier strategists were rarely engaged due to high cost; the only evidence of top strategic communication consultancy was the government's employment of an external PR agency, ApCo.

The findings show that Malaysia is transiting between pre-modern and modern to post-modern campaigns. Politicians and parties still rely on some pre-modern and modern methods such as the use of a partisan press and local volunteers in a short national campaign, especially in rural constituencies. In more developed areas, modern mediated campaign strategies are utilised with greater national coordination. However, in urban areas, post-modern techniques that employ new media are especially prevalent as politicians and parties attempt to build a hyper-media campaign to persuade voters.

walkabouts or group rallies organised by grassroots leaders. Despite this, there was some evidence of growing awareness of its importance. One opposition politician realised the significance of her personal image on campaign posters because it was the main impression people would have of her due to her limited access to traditional media.

Image-making was even more apparent during the 2013 General Election with posters of PM Najib plastered together with the constituency's candidate, connoting that a vote for the BN candidate was a vote endorsing the PM and his policies. His personal popularity became a campaign strategy as survey results showed he was more likeable than his party and government. It is argued that the attempts to emulate the US presidential campaigning style marked a change from previous general elections. Instead of focusing on party achievements, PM Najib presented his "State of the Union" address; his campaign introduced the Action Kit for young voters, similar to US President Obama's first presidential campaign.

However, most Malaysian politicians still prefer to focus on party instead of personal image. One politician said that political parties should project a certain image based on their long-term work so that they have personality and credibility, while another media consultant said her party was committed to promoting an inclusive multi-racial image. It is submitted that differences between the Malaysian parliamentary and US presidential systems result in US politicians, especially presidential incumbents and challengers, depending heavily on personal image in their campaigns while Malaysian politicians choose to adopt and promote their party's image and logo.

D. Popular Culture

The use of popular culture and celebrity power in political communication was evident in this research. Opposition party DAP used ideas from the online game "Plants versus Zombies" on posters and Facebook advertisements for their voter registration campaign. Celebrities and pop stars, local and international, campaigned and performed at road shows, concerts and dinners during the 2013 General Election. Even opposition party PAS fielded a former singer as a parliamentary candidate. YouTube music videos emerged such as "Love is in the Air," performed by the MCA Federal Territory's 1Malaysia task force team. MIC had its "*Beribu-ribu Tahniah, Barisan Nasional Berjaya*" (Thousands of Congratulations to *Barisan Nasional's* Success) music video while DAP created its "Ubah Rocket Style" video, a parody of Korean pop star PSY's hit video Gangnam Style.

It is argued that attempts to use popular culture and celebrity power should correspond to the politician's personality or party image as any inconsistencies can be identified, affecting credibility and authenticity. For example, critics panned MCA's panda mascot *Wen Wen* during the 2013 General Election as it is a symbol of China and not native to Malaysia. In contrast, DAP's Ubah hornbill was accepted, being the Sarawak state bird. PM Najib's attempt to share the stage with Korean pop star PSY turned into a fiasco when the latter refused to appear on stage together with him.

While there is no conclusive evidence of the strategic persuasiveness of celebrity power and popular culture to win

votes, it is clear that political parties are willing to use shortcuts to create media hype and gain voter attention.

E. Media Team and Outsourcing of Work

The study found that BN had more resources to engage a large media team for its communications. One consultant, who works for BN, has a media team of about 40 bloggers and a network of cyber-troopers on Facebook and Twitter who are versatile in photo- and video-editing as well as multimedia. The more than 2,000 people trained by his new media unit, 20% are active on the Web, spreading information online.

Nevertheless, most Malaysian politicians do not have professional media employees and rely on non-professional volunteer supporters, party workers, family and friends. One BN politician, who has a public relations background, relied on his media friends' support. He said, "It helps a lot because when you know the media people personally ... they will go a little bit out of their way to help ... in some ways [sic] or another." If additional help is needed, they would request from their party's central media team. Individual politicians sometimes create their own campaign materials but they have to ensure contextual congruency with their party's main communication strategies.

The researcher submits that Malaysian political parties are increasingly professionalised in their approach but the same is not occurring for individual politicians because the Malaysian political system is similar to the UK Parliamentary system where political communication is spearheaded by the party, unlike the US candidate-centred presidential structure where individual politicians assemble their own teams.

Malaysian politicians and political parties often involve socio-political bloggers in political campaigns. Some are embedded in the team and follow the campaign trail, often synchronizing their blogging strategy with the party of the politician. Other bloggers write on an ad-hoc basis, with loose ties. On the other hand, there were also independent bloggers who banded together to monitor and contribute socio-political news the now-defunct blogging portal, Media Perak.

The study found that political communication outsourcing was quite common in Malaysia. Not all Malaysian politicians have adapted to the Internet, especially those above 45, who are not technology-savvy. These digital adoptees outsource by employing and delegating young people to manage their online communications, said a blogger. However, having technical skills does not mean that these employees have the ability and knowledge to manage online political content. Any mistake could affect the politician's image and reputation.

One blogger encountered a situation when the online administrator of a PAS politician posted an article on the politician's personal blog and wrote "*Umno gadai harta bumiputera kepada bangsa asing*" (Umno mortgaged properties of indigenous people to foreigners). When the blogger asked the administrator what he meant by the term "*bangsa asing*", the latter said it referred to non-Malaysians and non-Malays. The blogger told the administrator it was inappropriate to refer to non-Malay Malaysians as foreigners and advised him to delete the posting. This incurred the wrath of PAS supporters who went online to attack him. Meanwhile,

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1. the PAS politician was unaware about the online war on his personal blog until he was informed by the blogger, after which he immediately ordered his administrator to delete the posting.

Interpersonal communication includes non-verbal communication, which contextualises the message. This is why face-to-face conversations in coffee shops and cafés may not transcend well online. Without access to non-verbal communication, Netizens may find such postings contextually unacceptable to their cyber-values and culture. Some Malaysian politicians have been accused on social media for using racist language or passing sexist comments, which is why they have to be careful as any *faux pas* can cause a crisis, affecting their reputation and derailing their campaign.

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In today's mediated environment, politicians gain Web presence and publicity via websites, blogs and social media such as Facebook and Twitter. The study found that politicians did not have problems gaining online media attention as they were already public figures; people naturally flocked to their websites, blogs and social media accounts. One politician said he did not need to "sell" his blog space or tweet as people naturally followed his online presence. Another consultant said his Internet popularity is due to his party and government position; as head of the new media unit, he has online followers. One consultant observed that politicians who command respect from both sides – BN and PR – often have exceptionally high followings such as Sports Minister Khairy Jamaluddin and former Temerloh MP Saifuddin Abdullah.

New media are especially useful for new politicians who do not get much traditional media coverage, noted one consultant. The study found different strategies that have been used to obtain Internet publicity. For example, the online writer could post trustworthy and credible articles with citations and references or publish news scoops. They could also write in a language style that is easily understood.

Although blogs are more interactive than websites, said one blogger, social media has become more influential. A consultant said that the blog's "pull" factor means they have to keep attracting readers, unlike social media where information is "pushed" and delivered right to the virtual doorstep: The Facebook wall or Twitter account. It is easy to use social media to spread news through sharing or re-tweeting, unlike blogs. Online influence occurs when thousands of people re-tweet or share information, and social media users can team up to virally influence using their networks, said one consultant.

It is thus not surprising that one politician has been using social media to create nationwide awareness about his political party. While he admitted that his tweets did not have much impact locally as his home state has minimal Twitter users, they have reached other states such as Penang, Selangor, Kelantan, Sabah and Sarawak. His Twitter followers could find out more about his home state's campaign, and by re-tweeting and sharing his views, he is able to increase his reach. Another blogger noted that Twitter could be used for online debates because its short bursts of political debates, verbal fights and "hit-and-run" arguments between MPs made it interesting.

However, one blogger observed that people often struggle with Twitter due to its 140-characters limit which can cause miscommunication due to insufficient context. Limited understanding of cyber-culture, cyber-values and netiquette can cause a social media crisis. Politicians, especially, have to carefully filter their views before posting or tweeting as Malaysia is partisan on matters of race, religion and politics. One politician shared his personal experience of being criticized after he tweeted about an opposition candidate's pregnancy while she was standing for elections. The lady felt insulted and accused the politician of being a male chauvinist. The politician said that, "If you want to be on Twitter, you'll be prepared that people are going to twist [your meaning]."

Due to the new media's interactive nature, politicians and political parties often receive feedback on their blogs and social media sites. However, sometimes they encounter vulgarities and name-calling from anonymous Internet users. One politician usually ignores such comments as he refuses to engage those who make him feel like "shit" and a "useless fella". One socio-political blogger allows rebuttals on his blog unless they were vulgar or personal attacks. He added, "It's fine if they disagree. They might have perfectly valid points and I could learn something from them ... because I believe that's what encourages conversations."

In the event of a social media crisis, one blogger gave the first rule as "do not delete." Facebook administrators should address the comments, no matter how critical, so that people can ultimately see that these critics have been unreasonably harsh, he added. The issue has to be addressed from the start by replying and re-stating the facts in the conversation until the issue is resolved or re-directed to a new incident, he added. "You basically have to ride it out," he stated.

This study also found that very few Malaysian politicians have mastered the art of social media, which is about creating conversations and interaction. Instead, they use social media to make announcements and release notices about their activities: Where they are and what they are doing. It is argued that this one-to-many mode of communication is not an effective use of social media. Very few politicians effectively use new media to interact and obtain feedback on issues and policies; some have their own accounts but are inactive with minimal postings.

Advertising is another useful political communication strategy. One consultant said that advertising promotions help to obtain more followers as they increase the message reach and build brand awareness, in addition to being cost-effective. He added that his party only spent RM3,400 on social media advertising over nine months. Opposition parties have also found new media to be an effective tool for fundraising.

Politicians in large urban constituencies who find it hard to connect personally with the huge voting population, should use the media to reach as many as possible, especially during elections when coverage is limited. Although mediated communication seems impersonal, it is submitted that urban politicians can still use new media to create a personal connection with their constituents if they individually reply to online messages; such virtual contact creates a digital bond despite lack of face-to-face interaction.

IX. CONCLUSION

There is some evidence of media-ization and PR-ization in Malaysian political parties, with the use of centralised management structures, external marketing and media professionals. However, Malaysian politics is not as PR-ized as the US whose candidate-centred presidential structure sees individual politicians assembling their own teams and media professionals playing a strategic political role.

As Malaysia's political system is similar to the UK party-centric system, political communication strategies are usually spearheaded by political party leaders, not individual politicians, while media staff provide feedback and execution support. Some Malaysian politicians have a small team of supporters and volunteers helping them with local campaigns but they are linked to their party's main publicity team.

In less urbanised areas, political parties still rely on ideology and grassroots organisations to campaign. Interpersonal communication is still crucial in rural areas and smaller towns, which means that media-ization of politics is an urban phenomenon. However, rapid urbanisation has weakened traditional ties, resulting in a large group of middle-ground voters or "floaters". Political parties can no longer rely on their supporters' ideology and loyalty; they are switching to image, branding, and celebrity power as short-cuts to gaining attention in a crowded, competitive political market.

Malaysia is transiting between pre-modern and modern to post-modern campaigns. Politicians and parties depend on some pre-modern and modern methods such as the use of a partisan press, reliance on local volunteers and a short national campaign, especially in rural areas. However, as the constituency develops, modern mediated campaign strategies are employed with greater national coordination; in urban areas, post-modern techniques are used as ICTs emerge. Politicians and parties reach voters directly using new media as they build a hyper-media campaign.

Thus, media-ization and PR-ization in Malaysian politics will become more and more sophisticated as the country rapidly urbanises and becomes more dependent on ICTs.

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